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THE WICKED STEPMOTHER.

AN ARMENIAN FOLK-TALE.

ONCE upon a time there was a hunter, who was a widower and had a son from his former wife. He married another wife, but soon was mortally sick. On his death-bed he said to his new wife: —

"Wife, I am dying, and I know that when my son grows up he will follow my profession. Take care, do not let him go to the Black Mountains to hunt."

After the death of the hunter, the son growing up began to follow his father's profession and became a hunter. One day his stepmother said: —

"Son, your father, when dying, said that after you grow up, if you follow his profession, you should not go to the Black Mountains to hunt."

But the lad, paying no attention to what his father had advised him, one day took his bow and arrow, mounted his horse, and hastened to the Black Mountains to hunt. So soon as he reached there, lo! a giant made his appearance on the back of his horse of lightning, and exclaimed: —

"How now? have you never heard my name, that you have dared to come and hunt on my ground?" And he threw three terrible maces at the lad, who very cleverly avoided them, hiding himself under the belly of his horse.

Now it was his turn: he drew his bow and arrow, took aim, and shot the giant, who was nailed to the ground. He at once mounted the giant's horse of lightning, who, galloping, soon brought him to a magnificent palace, gilded all over with gold and decorated with precious jewels. Lo! a maiden as beautiful as the sun appeared in the window, saying, —

"Human being, the snake upon its belly and the bird with its wings could not come here; how could you venture to come?"

"Your love brought me hither, fair creature," answered the lad, who had already fallen in love with the charming maiden.

"But the giant will come and tear you into pieces," said the maiden, who also had fallen in love with the lad.

"I have killed him, and there lies his carcass!" answered the lad.

The door of the palace was opened, and the lad was received by the maiden, who told him that she was the daughter of a prince, and that the giant had stolen her and kept her in that palace, where she had forty beautiful handmaids serving her.

"And as you have killed the giant," she added, "I, who am a

virgin, shall be your wife, and all these maidens will serve us." And they accepted one another as husband and wife.

Opening the treasures of the giant, they found innumerable jewels, gold, silver, and all kinds of wealth. The lad thought such a magnificent palace, with so many treasures worthy of a prince, and the most beautiful wife in the world, were things that he could hardly have dreamed of, and he decided to live there, going to hunt every day as usual.

One day, however, he came home sighing, "Ah! alas, alas!"

"How now? what is the matter?" said the beautiful bride. "Am I and my forty handmaids not enough to please you? Why did you sigh?"

"You are sweet, my love," said the lad; "but my mother also is sweet. You have your place in my heart, but my mother also has her place. I remembered her; therefore I sighed."

"Well," said the young bride, "take a horse-load of gold to your mother; let her live in abundance and be happy."

"No," said the lad; "let me go and bring her here."

"Very well, go then," said the young bride.

The lad went to his stepmother, and, telling her all what he had done, brought her to the palace of the Black Mountains. Here she was the mother-in-law of the fair bride, and therefore the superior of the whole palace. Both the bride and the maidens had to submit to her.

The lad used to go out for hunting. The stepmother, being well versed in witchcraft and medicine, went secretly and administered some remedy to the corpse of the giant, so that he was soon healed. Falling in love with the giant, she took him to the palace and hid him in a cellar, where secretly she paid him daily visits, as she was afraid of her stepson. Wishing, however, to make her coquetry freely, the witch one day said to the giant, —

"Giant, you must advise me a way where I may send my son on an errand, and from where he may never come back."

Upon the advice of the giant she entered her room, and, putting under her bed pieces of very thin and dry Oriental bread, lay down upon the bed and pretended sickness. In the evening the lad returned from hunting, and, hearing that his stepmother was ill, hastened to her side and asked, —

"What is the matter, mother?"

"O son!" exclaimed the witch, with a sickly voice, "I am very sick; I shall die!" and, as she turned from one side to the other, the dry bread began to crackle. "Hark," exclaimed the witch, "how my bones are cracking!"

"What is the remedy, mother? what can I do for you?" asked the lad.

"O my son," said the witch, "there is only one remedy for my sickness, and that is the Melon of Life. I shall never be healed if I do not eat one of that fruit which you could bring for me."

"All right, mother," said the lad; "I will fetch you the Melon of Life."

He at once started on the expedition, and, after a long journey, was guest in the house of an old woman, who inquired where he was going. When she heard of the errand she said to the lad, —

"Son, you are deceived; the expedition is a fatal one; do not go."

But, as the lad insisted, the old woman said, —

"Well, then, let me advise you: on your way you will soon meet with a mansion which is the abode of forty giants, who in daytime go out hunting. But you will find their mother kneading dough. If you are agile enough to run and suck the nipples of the open breast of that giantess without being seen by her, you are safe; else she will make a mouthful of you and devour you."

The lad went, and found as foretold by the old woman. He was clever enough to suck the nipples of the giantess without being seen by her.

"A plague on her who advised you!" exclaimed the angry giantess, "else I would make a good morsel of you. But now, having sucked of my breast, you are like one of my own sons. Let me hide you in a box, lest the forty giants should come in the evening, and, finding you here, devour you."

And she shut the lad in a box. In the evening the forty giants came, and, smelling a human being, said, —

"O mother! all the year long we hunt beasts and fowls, which we bring home to eat together; and now we smell a human being, whom no doubt you have devoured to-day. Have you not preserved for us at least a few bones which we might chew?"

"It is you," answered the dame, "that are coming from mountains and plains, where no doubt you have found human beings, and the smell comes out of your own mouths. I have eaten no human being."

"No, mother, you have," exclaimed the giants.

"How if my nephew, the son of my human sister, has come here to pay me a visit?" answered the giantess.

"O mother!" exclaimed the giants, "show us our human cousin; we will not hurt him, but talk with him."

The giantess took the lad out of the box, and brought him to the giants, who were very much pleased to see a human being so small, but so beautiful and manly. Holding him up like a toy, the giants handed him to one another to gratify their curiosity by looking at him.

"Mother, what has our cousin come for?" inquired the giants.

"He has come," answered the giantess, "to pick a Melon of Life, and carry to his mother, who is sick. You must go and get the Melon of Life for him."

"Not we!" exclaimed the forty giants; "it is above our ability."

The youngest of the forty brothers, however, who was lame, said to the lad: —

"Cousin, I will go with you and get the Melon of Life for you. You must only take with you a jug, a comb, and a razor."

On the following day the lad took what was necessary and followed the lame giant, who soon brought him to the garden of the Melon of Life, which was guarded by fifty giants. The guards being asleep, the lad and his companion entered the garden without being perceived, and, picking the melon, began to run. But they were just crossing the hedges when the lame leg of the giant was caught by the fence, and, in his haste to release it, he shook the hedges, which crackled like thunder; and, lo! all the fifty giants awoke, crying: —

"Thieves! human beings! a good prey for us!" and began to pursue the lad and his lame companion.

"Throw the jug behind you, cousin!" exclaimed the lame giant.

The lad did so, and, lo! plains and mountains behind them were covered by an immense sea, which the fifty giants had to cross in order to reach them. By this means they gained quite a distance till the fifty crossed the sea.

"Now, cousin, throw the comb behind you!" exclaimed the giant.

The lad did so, and, lo! an extensive jungle between them and the fifty giants. They gained another great distance before the giants finished crossing the jungle.

"Throw the razor now, cousin!" exclaimed the giant.

The lad did so, and, lo! all the country between them and the fifty was covered with pieces of glass sharp like razors. Before the fifty could cross the distance, the thirty-nine giants came to the rescue of the two and took them safely to their borders.

The lad took leave of his adopted aunt and cousins, and, taking the Melon of Life with him, returned home. On his way, however, he was again the guest of the old woman, who, seeing him come safely, asked if he had succeeded in bringing the precious fruit.

"Yes, I have brought it, auntie," answered the lad, and told her his tale.

In the middle of the night, when the lad was sound asleep, the old woman got out the Melon of Life from the lad's saddle-bags and put a common melon in its place. In the morning, the lad brought the melon to his stepmother, who ate it and exclaimed: —

"Oh, happy! I am healed!"

(The story, after the manner of folk-tales, continues with repetition. The lad once more hunts, while the witch and the giant devise new methods to destroy him. This time it is the milk of the Fairy Lioness which is to be obtained. As before, the youth proceeds on the expedition and becomes the guest of the old woman, who at first dissuades him, but finally gives him advice. He is to shoot the lioness in the forehead. This action will perform the part of a surgical operation by relieving the beast from a pustule, and the gratitude of the animal will thus be secured. The lad obtains the milk, but steals the cubs of the lioness and is pursued. He is saved by his clever response to her censure. He had wanted the cubs as a keepsake. The milk is presented, but the witch replaces it with goat's milk. The stepmother blames the giant, whom she had asked to send the youth on a journey whence he would never return, and the giant advises that the youth be asked to procure the Water of Life. The step-mother again pretends sickness, and asks the help of the hero to seek the Water of Life. The lad mounts his horse and takes with him the two cubs, which by this time have grown into young lions. As in previous journeys, he comes to his hostess, who warns him: "This is the most dangerous expedition that ever human being has undertaken, and no one has ever returned from the way you intend to go. Be advised, go back; your mother is surely false."

"Let come what may, I will go," said the lad, and, taking the two lions with him, started for the fountain of the Water of Life.

He came to the fountain and found the water oozing in with the thickness of a hair. As soon as he placed his jug under it, a sound sleep overpowered his senses, and he remained there benumbed for seven days and nights. Soon innumerable large scorpions began to attack the sleeping hero, but the lions destroyed all of them. Then thousands of terrible serpents made their appearance and assaulted the lad, hissing with their forked tongues. The lions, after a bloody fight, destroyed them also. Soon a whole army of voracious beasts surrounded the fountain in search of the lad. The lions, after a sanguinary strife, succeeded in destroying them also.

At the end of the seven days and nights the lad awoke, and to his great horror saw that he was surrounded by a high wall, which the lions had built of the carcases of the beasts and serpents they had killed. The two faithful guards were now sitting at both sides of their master and watching his every motion. The lad, seeing them stained with blood from head to foot, understood how much he owed them for the preservation of his life. He then washed them clean with the Water of Life, and taking the jug, which by that time was filled, went to his hostess.

"Did you bring the Water of Life?" asked the old dame.

"Yes, auntie, I did," answered the lad, presenting her the jug full of water.

"It was not you that succeeded," returned the old woman, "but Heaven and your faithful lions preserved your life."

During the night, as the lad was sleeping, the old woman poured the Water of Life in another vase, and filled the jug with common water, which the lad in the morning took to his stepmother, who, drinking it, said: —

"Oh, happy! I am healed!"

The following day the lad again went hunting. The witch said to to the giant: —

"Can you not devise some means to destroy my stepson? By Heaven, I will destroy you this time if you do not advise me how to destroy him."

"Your stepson is brave," answered the giant; "he is an unique hero, and no one can kill him but yourself."

"How? how?" exclaimed the witch with great joy; "tell me and I will do it."

"Do you not remember the three red hairs among his black hairs on his head? So soon as they are picked, your son dies."

On the following day the witch said to the lad: —

"Come, son, lay your head in my lap and take a nap."

The lad did so and soon slept. The witch immediately took hold of the three red hairs and picked them out. A spasm or two, and the hero died.

"Now, giant," said the witch, "take that sword and chop this corpse into small pieces."

"Not I," answered the giant; "my hand will not rise to chop such a hero."

"You coward!" exclaimed the witch, and, taking the sword herself, chopped the corpse into small pieces, put these in a sack, and threw them over the garden wall. One of the little fingers, however, fell in the garden.

The lions apprehended that their master was killed, and his chopped body was in the bag. They immediately took hold of the bag and carried it to the old woman, the hostess of the hero. Opening the bag, she got out the body, and, putting every part to its proper place, made a whole; only the little finger was missing. She explained to the lions what was missing, and they at once went, and, smelling their master's finger in the garden, found and brought it to the old woman, who put it in its place. Now she brought the Milk of the Fairy Lioness, which she had secretly preserved, and poured it over the body. Immediately all the broken bones, muscles,

and sinews came together, and, the members being united, the body became as sound and delicate as that of a new-born babe. Then she brought the Melon of Life and put it before his nostrils. So soon as the lad smelled it, he sneezed seven times. Then she poured the Water of Life down his throat. At once the lad opened his eyes and jumped up, saying: —

"Oh, what a sound sleep was this that overpowered my senses!"

"Sleep!" exclaimed the kind woman. "Yes, a sleep out of which you would have never awaked had not Providence preserved you." And she told him what had happened.

"Now, my good hostess," said the lad, "you have done me a kindness next to God, — a kindness that I can never reward. May Heaven reward you!"

He brought her from his treasures a horse-load of gold and a horse-load of silver, saying: —

"These are for you; spend as much as you like and pray for me so long as you live."

The lad came to his palace and found that his beautiful bride was imprisoned in a dark cellar, where she was left to starve; while the witch, his stepmother, was in excess of merriment with the giant and half a dozen younglings around her. They were all horror-struck to see the hero enter it, and the giant was about to make his exit from a secret door in the wall, when the lad seized hold of him, saying, —

"How now, coward? are you running? Stop and solve me this puzzle: who are those ugly younglings that are infecting the very air of my palace?"

"They are my children out of yonder woman, your mother," answered the giant.

"Mother? I have no mother!" exclaimed the lad. "You increase so soon, do you? Now we are going to have a great merriment. Go and bring me from the yonder mountain wood enough to build a large pile."

The giant obeyed, and soon a large pile of wood was built in the courtyard of the palace. The lad struck a flint and lighted the wood. Soon the whole pile was on fire burning like a furnace.

"Now, giant," said the lad, "take hold of these bastards, and throw them into the fire one by one.

The giant obeyed, and all the younglings were burned on the pile.

"Bring now yonder witch, and throw her into the fire!" ordered the lad. She also shared the fate of her bastard children.

"Now shall I throw you also?" asked the lad of the giant.

"Hero!" exclaimed the giant, "I honor you; I will obey you."

"Well, then," said the lad, "I will not kill you. Come, pass under my sword and swear obedience to me."

The giant kissed the sword, and, passing under it, became the bondman of the lad.

The lad then released his beautiful bride from her dark prison. They celebrated anew their nuptials for forty days and forty nights, and enjoyed a happy life thereafter.

Thus they attained their wishes. May Heaven grant that you may attain your wishes!

Three apples fell from heaven: one for me, one for the story-teller, and one for him who entertained the company.

A. G. Seklemian.